DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 100 SO 019 961

AUTHOR Gans, Curtis B.
TITLE Socialization and Participation: A Research Agenda for the 21st Century.
PUB DATE 7 Oct 88
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Citizenship for the 21st Century (Washington, DC, October 5-7, 1988). For related documents, see ED 302 474, ED 307 188, ED 307 192-193, ED 308 101, and SO 019 962.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alienation; Apathy; Child Development; *Citizen Participation; *Citizenship Education; Civics; Elections; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); Mass Media Effects; *Political Attitudes; Politics; Research Proposals; *Social Action; *Socialization; *Student Attitudes; *Voting
IDENTIFIERS Voting Behavior

ABSTRACT

If one counts both the mid-term and presidential elections, the United States has had the lowest voter turnout of any democracy in the world. In the 1986 election, only 16.6% of the eligible 18-24 year olds voted, and although final census surveys for that year are not yet published, it is unlikely that the turnout for that age group would have risen to a level of more than 30%. While in the 1970's the dominant attitude of non-voters was alienation, studies show the current attitude seems to be indifference. This poses a distinct danger for U.S. democracy in the future. Research is needed on child development and socialization, and on curricula and stimuli throughout the child's formative years. Research is also needed to determine the cause of the embarrassingly low percentage of participation by young voters in the electoral process, and what sets them apart from that much larger group that declines to participate. The effects of television on the perceptions and knowledge structure of students should also be reviewed. Regardless of the attempts made by educators in addressing these problems, until the nation addresses some of the larger issues of the political framework, such as ethical standards in politics and the obfuscatory nature of election campaigns, educators will have little impact on the system or on the students. The paper also includes a three page dialog among graduating seniors on the nature of good citizenship. (PPB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED309100

SOCIALIZATION AND PARTICIPATION:
A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

by

CURTIS B. GANS

SO019461

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

CURTIS B. GANS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I want to apologize to all of you. I gather I'm one of the two people who did not submit a paper in advance. On the other hand, 48 hours ago it wasn't clear that I was going to be here and 30 hours ago--as my voice may indicate--it wasn't clear that I was going to be able to say anything even if I was here. The only advantage of getting a cold from your 20-month old and then being flat on your back for 6 of the last 12 days while he gaily recovers in a day is that I had a chance to read everyone's paper, which is probably more than anyone else had the opportunity to do.

I think I understand how I was chosen to be here. There are great mentioners. I have spoken at conferences in which organizations involved in this conference were sponsors. I am, as some know, a charter member of the Freeman Butts admiration society. But what I don't know is how I was placed on this particular panel. Which is to say that in reading and hearing the two papers presented before me, it increased my knowledge of the literature of political and economic socialization by infinity. Which if one knows even rudimentary mathematics tells from whence I started. It is also to say to you, Judy and Beverly, that you have nothing to fear from me.

I spent the days on my back trying to figure out how I could relate to this conference and what I will do will be with only the barest reference to the papers presented in this session.

I intend therefore to speak as one who is deeply committed to the main thrust of this conference--the furtherance of civic and citizenship education and values. But I also intend to look

at the prospects for this enterprise through a glass darkly and to suggest a research agenda which might help instruct what we are doing here.

Many of you know me because in this fall period every two years, I get to be reasonably well known. Andy Warhol once said that everyone is famous for 15 minutes. Well, I get my fifteen minutes and more every two years because I am the keeper of voter turnout statistics. Those statistics are increasingly grim. This year only half the electorate voted. It was the lowest turnout since 1924, and outside of the South, it was the lowest turnout since 1824. Fewer people voted this year than in 1984, an occurrence that has happened only once before in this century --in 1944 when millions were abroad and in uniform.

In 1960 we had the highest turnout (62.8 of eligible Americans) since women were granted the franchise in 1920. That turnout was lower than most democracies, but it was assumed that were we to enfranchise blacks in the South and liberalize our system of registration, voting turnout would rise to approximate the turnout of many other democracies who share our lack of class consciousness and have a complex rather than a simple parliamentary democracy. Since 1960 we have enfranchised blacks, liberalized our voting laws, our elections have become more competitive and the demographic factors supposed to enhance turnout--age, education and mobility--have all been pointing to increase and our voter turnout has dropped 20 percent. I used to say we were the democracy with the lowest rate of participation

except Botswana, but Botswana is now ahead of us. If one counts both our mid-term and our Presidential elections, the United States has the lowest turnout of any democracy in the world.

Of more moment for this conference, in the 1986 election 16.6 percent of eligible 18-24 year olds voted and, although final Census surveys for this year are not yet published, it is unlikely that turnout for 18-24 year olds would have risen to a level of more than 30 percent. Both these figures are fully 20 percentage points lower than the national average and represent 40 and 60 percent drop-offs from adult participation. Young people are the only newly enfranchised group which has had a decline in voting after enfranchisement.

In 1976, we did a survey of non-voters. What we found then was that the dominant emotion reflected was alienation. Thanks to recent studies by Stephen Bennett of the University of Cincinnati, Cox Newspapers and a series of focus groups conducted by Peter Hart in Baltimore for People for the American Way, it seems now that, at least among the young, the dominant attitude is indifference.

To illustrate let me quote from two triple spaced pages of transcript of one of the focus groups Hart conducted in Baltimore:

> PETER: How many people's parents were registered and voted? Okay. Most everybody except for Tim's, their parents are voters. Jackie's were. Okay. That's interesting. Let me talk about something else,

if I can, and that is, we talk about being a good American, being a good citizen.

What's the definition of being a good citizen? Are you good citizens? Everyone thinks of themselves as good citizens, or not particularly, or apathetic, or what? Buddy, you're smiling.

BUDDY: Let's see. Well, I was thinking of--[inaudible]--the difference between a good American and a good citizen. I mean, I thought--[inaudible]. I think too many people are apathetic, and I know myself, and I don't think I'm aware as enough as I should be, and I don't think I'm involved enough as I should be.

I don't know. Let somebody else talk because--[inaudible].

PETER: Okay. Robin.

ROBIN: I don't think I'm a bad citizen. I just don't--I guess I don't take enough thought in what's going on around me.

PETER: Okay. Audrey.

AUDREY: I'm not a bad citizen just 'cause--[inaudible]. It's just that bad citizens go out killing people. Terrorists.

PETER: Okay. Good.

MR. : There's probably three levels of citizen--[inaudible]--your bad citizens probably tend to be the ones who do the law-breaking, and you have

your indifferent citizens who are basically apathetic, and then would be the good citizens who--[inaudible]--but also are involved and active in doing things for the community, or country at large. So contributing to society.

PETER: Okay. Good citizen, Leslie. What does it take to be a good citizen?

LESLIE: Someone who follows the laws.

PETER: Follows the laws. Good. Wendy.

WENDY: I think I'm a good person. I don't know about a good citizen. I don't know the difference. I don't think I'm a bad citizen, like everybody else. I'm a "B".

PETER: You're a "B". Okay. And what makes you a "B"?

WENDY: I don't get involved with politics. I don't get involved with the local government. I don't get involved with anything except my neighbor. You know, if my neighbor needs help at the grocery store or something, or some little old lady needs help crossing the street, or I run around for grandparents, neighbors, anybody who needs a ride, you know.

PETER: Jackie.

JACKIE: I don't think I'm a bad citizen. I mean, I don't do nothing really bad, and steal or take drugs, or anything.

PETER: And what's a good citizen? Brian.

BRIAN: I'm not a bad citizen either, but, you know, it's just by watching some of the TV reports--you know--about voting and all, sometimes you see reports that--you know rigging elections and stuff like that. So, I sit back and think sometimes my vote won't matter anyway.

PETER: Is anybody involved--I really wasn't aiming just at voting--but is anybody involved with the community in any way? Anybody do volunteer work of any type? Wendy, what do you do?

WENDY: I have a softball team--well, actually, a soccer team and a little league baseball team.

PETER: What, do you coach, or--

WENDY: Manage kids.

PETER: You manage. Okay. Little kids.

WENDY: Yeah.

PETER: Yes. And how about you, Audrey?

AUDREY: I coach a soccer team, and baseball. My nephew has cerebral palsy, so whenever his friends want to come over or something, if their parents let them, I go pick them up for them.

PETER: Anybody else do anything in terms of community, or, you know, Big Brother/Little Sister programs, internships, anything?

LISA: I have in the past. I just recently

haven't been doing anything.

And it goes on like that for about 60 pages. We have a lot of high-minded thoughts in this room, many of which I deeply share. But I fear that those thoughts are being poured into vessels which can't even understand much less respond to the words.

This leads me to the question of research. And it leads me back to my 20-month-old son who gave me the cold that lingered while he was fine in a matter of days. I remember taking that child to his 18-month medical check-up. On the way, he said, "Dr. Bromberg," and he smiled. (He likes Dr. Bromberg.) And then he said "Hurt." (He remembered the shots he has had at the doctor's office.) Similarly, in Florida at 14 months, he could clearly see, understand and articulate the sequence between Daddy, money and the Mickey Mouse balloon he wanted. I was taken by Judy's discussion of schemata, for it seemed to me that my child had his own rudimentary schemata. And that in the design of curriculum for grades 8-9, we will be more successful if the curriculum we plan here fits into home experience and school experience that dovetails with the development schemata at every stage of the child's life. Thus, I think, I'm suggesting research on development and socialization, curricula and stimuli throughout the child's formative years.

The second point I wish to make is that the participation rate of youth is unusually low. It is not simply that it is at 16.6 percent in mid-term elections and 30 percent in Presidential

elections, but that it is so much lower than the rest of the electorate. If youth participated at a rate perhaps 20 percent lower than the rest of the electorate then you could blame it on lack of roots, personal and family socialization, unique registration barriers among other things. But because it is between 40 and 60 percent lower than the rest of the electorate, youth's lack of participation poses a distinct danger for democracy in the future.

In this context, and in order to devise wise social and educational policy, it would be useful to find out about the characteristics of those who participate among various young people's demographic sub-groupings. Are there differences in parental upbringing and values, is their school experience different, is their relationship to the mass media different, who are their peers and who influences their thinking, what involvement experiences have they been engaged in, etc.? I think quite simply while we know enough to understand that the situation with regard to youth participation is bad, we do not yet know enough to effectively set it aright.

Thirdly, I was positively impressed with Michael Nelson's paper, in part because one likes reinforcement for one's own thinking. But also it dovetails with Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves To Death, John Splaine's and Wilma Longstreet's presentations at the recent Council for the Advancement of Citizenship Conference and a piece which I wrote last summer for The Arts and Leisure Section of The New York Times. In each of

these works, the focus is what television as an institution and in its programming and other uses has done to our society and polity. What we need to know is how television affects the perceptions and knowledge structure of the young, how we may cope with its pernicious effects and how we might use that particular technology for the service of enhancing education and involvement.

Fourthly, while I very firmly share Stuart Langston's commitment to involvement and public service as a means of developing citizenship, I don't think we know enough about what forms of involvement yield sustaining participation--what forms of participation can overcome the likely disillusionment of any experience in a political marketplace in which change is at best incremental and problems tend to be only partially soluble on the level of active participation. We need very simply both experimental and longitudinal studies of what involvement activities work. (We also, I might add parenthetically, need the capacity to mount such longitudinal studies without enormous overhead expense.)

Fifthly, I think we have to look at the vessel into which we are pouring our thoughts. Everyone who participated in Peter Hart's focus group was a high school graduate. The administrative and teaching structure which produced those individuals and the large scale indifference that is being reported in all studies is now being called upon to fulfill great plans for civic education. We are today a far distance from the

times of John Dewey, Robert Maynard Hutchins and Frank Porter Graham in the understanding of and commitment to education for citizenship. And we need to examine how we get from where we are to some place where the noble ideas expressed in this room have the type of administrative and teaching support to make an impact on young minds.

The last thing I have to say is simply that as deeply committed as I am to civic education, we are not going to get a committed and socially conscious set of young people and larger society until some of the larger questions of our polity are dealt with. The only paper presented to this conference with which I strongly disagreed was the one which suggested that we should not develop critical thinking because it would lead to cynicism. Given the quality of our politics now, I would expect that the critical thinking would lead to legitimate cynicism but that is not a valid argument for depriving our young of the tools for critical thinking. Rather it is an argument to do something about those aspects of our polity which are likely to breed cynicism.

In this regard we need to look at values--the tendency of politicians to demagogue against government creating a we/they dichotomy between the people and their government, making government the enemy and reducing the impulse to participate; of a tendency since the mid-1970's for people to seek their own self-fulfillment of which the quarter of those attending college studying business is only one symptom and of leaders pushing

self-seeking values at the expense of commitment to the community. We need to look at political parties which are weak, misaligned and too often subject to the demobilizing influences of political consultants, technology and message obfuscation. We need to look at government which seems to lack the capacity to both anticipate problems before they become virtually intractable or respond well to sustained citizen desires; to the continuing question of the decline in ethical standards for leader. We need to look at both the citizen usage of and broadcast conduct in the medium called television; and we need to assess and deal with the fact that we are growing increasingly atomized, lacking in community, producing a polity in which the citizen is becoming a spectator and consumer of politics rather than a participant and stockholder.

It seems to me that unless/until we address some of these factors, the curriculum we are here trying to design will not make a substantial impact.

So over and above what we are doing as people concerned with curriculum and education, we need also be concerned as citizens and demand in a number of areas change from our leadership. One can be gratified at the growing concern and proliferation of organizational and institutional commitment to civic education, but we must elicit similar concern from and for other aspects of our polity.

I don't know whether I've added anything to this discussion. I surely haven't added anything to the literature of economic and

political socialization. I hope I've raised a few challenging questions and before my voice becomes truly adolescent, I would like to retire from the fray.